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News coverage of the Church dealing with the pandemic: Spanish and Italian newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on media representation of the Catholic Church during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic in Italy and Spain. The purpose is to know when and how the Catholic Church starred in the news; how its actions were presented, and using which frames. The work analyses the coverage of the Church in *Corriere della Sera* and *El País* between January and May 2020 and connects the deductive process (news frames by Semetko and Valkenburg) with the inductive process (setting common places or *topoi*) in order to get a better understanding of the news-framing. Findings show that both newspapers gave prevalence to news about the charitable work of the Catholic Church during the pandemic instead of about conflict with the political authorities because of restrictive measures. When it comes to the relationship with civil institutions, a positive image of the Church was offered, one that portrayed her as ready to collaborate and apply the preventive measures recommended by the health authorities. The positive perception is more frequent than the negative one when there are dualities in the *topoi* that are found in the interpretation of the facts.

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1. Introduction

The most representative image of the hardest lockdown in Europe in 2020 was absence: streets, squares, or historical monuments, that so often used to be full of neighbors and visitors, appeared devoid of life and movement, like a static scene captured by a photographic camera. Among all of them, Saint Peter's Square, a point of reference for all Catholic people and a universal tourist destination, was the best example of the exceptional measures taken in those days. There, one of the iconic images summarized the effects of the pandemic on social life. It was April 26, and the Pope was preparing to impart, alone, the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. This square, designed to embrace everyone, was completely empty.

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The image travelled around the world with adjectives about the exceptional scene ('historical', 'extraordinary' or 'unusual'). In the same way, the development of religious activity without the physical presence of the people transferred the meeting of communities to the digital network. This was a challenge for the Catholic Church and news for a large part of public opinion. The life of the Church did not stop, but the approach required the mediation of the media.

This paper focuses on this mediation role and analyzes the story about the work of the Catholic Church during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic what was published by the Italian press and the Spanish press. Our objective is to know when and how the Catholic Church starred in the news; how its actions were presented, and through which frames it was seen. This paper analyzes *Corriere della Sera* and *El País*, the best-selling daily newspapers in Italy and Spain.

The aim is to know what image the media offered about the Church during a global crisis. The interest in the question is related, on the one hand, to the efforts made by religious entities, especially the Catholic Church, to present their message to society without distortions and, on the other, to the knowledge of the keys that produce these distortions.

2. The Church and the pandemic in Italy and Spain

In December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) admitted the existence of a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease associated with it, Covid-19, initially located in Wuhan (China). From that moment, the EU began to take measures to respond to this threat. Thus, on January 17th, the Health Security Committee met to address the new coronavirus for the first time under the indications of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. The risk was considered low or very low (European Commission 2020, 2). A few days later, on January 24th, the first case was known in Europe, in France. At that time the disease was still linked to China or to people who had just returned from there, however, on January 28th, the first 'native' case was known in Europe; it was a German person who had not traveled to Wuhan. In Italy, the first cases were known on January 30th. They were two Chinese tourists who had been in Milan on January 23rd and, later, traveled to Rome; the first non-imported case was found in the hospital in Codogno (Lombardy) on February 21st. In Spain, the first known patient was a German tourist on the island of La Gomera, on January 31st, but the first local case was known on February 26th.

In Europe, the first deaths occurred in France on February 15th and in Italy on February 22nd. In Spain, the first death occurred on February 13th, but its cause was only known later. From that moment, cases multiplied. In Italy, Lombardy became the 'ground zero' of the pandemic, and one of the most affected regions in Europe. Spain would also lead with the worst statistics during the first wave, looking itself in the Italian mirror to gain an idea from the advance of the pandemic in that country how things might go on the Iberian Peninsula.

In both countries, the authorities began to take measures as soon as the risks were known and, above all, when the first diagnosed cases appeared. Just a few days separated the declaration of a state of alarm in both countries: on March 8th, in Italy; on

March 14th, in Spain. The pandemic in Italy seemed to advance on a timeline approximately a week ahead of Spain's.

In addition, both governments approved severe measures of lockdown almost at the same time. In Italy, the lockdown began in Lombardy, but on March 9th, Prime Minister Conte extended it to the whole country; in Spain, on the 11th, President Sánchez announced it for March 14th. In this country, the measures did not include the closure of places of worship but made it difficult, in fact, to participate in religious ceremonies and activities, especially due to the impossibility of traveling to the spaces dedicated to worship.

In Spain, the Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14th (BOE 2020) said in article 11:

Attendance at places of worship and civil and religious ceremonies, including funerals, is conditioned on the adoption of organizational measures consisting of avoiding crowds of people, depending on the size and characteristics of the places, in such a way that guarantee attendees the possibility of respecting the distance between them of at least one meter.

In Italy, however, although places of worship were not closed in the Decree of the President of the Consiglio of March 8th (Gazetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana 2020) religious ceremonies, including funerals were suspended by Article 1:

i) the opening of places of worship is conditional on the adoption of organizational measures that avoid gatherings of people, considering the size and characteristics of the places, and such as to guarantee visitors the possibility of respecting the distance between them of at least one meter as per attachment 1 letter d). Civil and religious ceremonies, including funeral ones, are suspended.

As in the case of other individual freedoms, restrictions generated protests and reproaches. The Council of Europe (2020, 6) had to remind governments of the requirement of proportionality in these initiatives:

Effective enjoyment of all these rights and freedoms guaranteed by Articles 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the Convention is a benchmark of modern democratic societies. Restrictions on them are only permissible if they are established by law and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued, including the protection of health. The significant restrictions to usual social activities, including access to public places of worship, public gatherings and wedding and funeral ceremonies, may inevitably lead to arguable complaints under the above provisions. It is for the authorities to ensure that any such restriction, whether it is based on a derogation, is clearly established by law, in compliance with relevant constitutional guarantees and proportionate to the aim it pursues.

The religious authorities also showed their disappointment, especially when, despite the fact that in some cases where no rules were being broken, the forces the law intervened to end ceremonies and to fine those responsible. The debate was transferred to the media, although the respective Episcopal Conferences had given instructions, from the beginning, to obey the sanitary rules. Thus, the Executive Commission of the Spanish Episcopal Conference (CEE 2020) published a note on March 13th, in order to make '... a call to follow the instructions of those responsible for health to avoid the accelerated progression of the disease' while its president, Cardinal Omella, invited people to follow the masses live-streamed on radio and television. The Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI 2020), in a note published on March 8th, regretted the hard

measures adopted, but he accepted them for the common good: ‘The acceptance of the decree is mediated only by the will to do, even in this juncture, one’s own part to contribute to the protection of public health’.

Italy and Spain share values, history, and religious tradition, although Italy’s closeness with Vatican City has always made it unique. However, essentially the two are comparable, since both are countries with a Catholic majority (around 80% baptized), but with a much lower rate of daily religious practice. What has been called a ‘Catholic imprinting’ (Verzichelli 2007) remains in this majority, and it spreads religious values in social life, although some public officials reproach the religious authorities for this. These values have remained stable even during the pandemic, a period in which religiosity has not suffered (Reeskens et al. 2021, 159), because paradoxically, ‘in a certain sense it is precisely at the moment of greatest difficulty that the need for support in spiritual terms becomes stronger, in the hope of finding comfort in one’s faith and beliefs’ (Coppola et al. 2021).

Despite Italy and Spain having a similar profile in terms of religious values and the influence and the role of the Catholic Church in public life, the social debate about the difficult balance between religious freedom and health care differed in the two countries during the first months of the pandemic. In Italy, some voices recalled the capacity of Catholic Church to decide the best measures in liturgical celebrations to prevent contagion, but in Spain this issue was hardly raised in public opinion – there were hardly any complaints about the restrictions on religious activity, and these came only from people critical of power.

During the pandemic, misinformation grew; in fact, the development of the disease was plagued with fake news (Pérez-Dasilva, Meso-Ayerdi, and Mendiguren-Galdospín 2020). In this sense, it is necessary to know if the media also offered a misleading view of the Church’s work during the pandemic. It is relevant to the extent that it helps us to understand the role of the press in building the public image of the Catholic Church. In a context of fake news and disinformation such as the one experienced, it is necessary to analyze the process of the construction of reality. In this way, it will be possible to delve into, on the one hand, the decision guidelines and productive routines of the media, and on the other, the implications that the process of construction of an ‘alternative reality’ in the media may have for social organizations, especially the Catholic Church.

3. Methodology and the field of the study

In this context, the comparative analysis of Italy and Spain seems especially timely. Both countries share religious tradition (both are Catholic, with a similar percentage of believers and religious practice; and with the presence of the Catholic Church in public life along with other religious communities) and both experienced a simultaneous development of Covid-19 and in the same geographical area of the south of Europe, on the Mediterranean. However, the voice of the Church in Italy is received differently than it is in Spain, hence the relevance of the comparison. If the objective is to know

whether the media discourse varies between the Italian and Spanish press, and what influence the frames and *topoi* have on it, the comparison can help.

Therefore, the research objectives are:

1. Quantify the presence of the Catholic Church in the Italian and Spanish quality press;
2. Identify which frames and *topoi* are in the news about the activities of the Church during the pandemic;
3. Compare the journalistic treatment of the Church and religious activity in the Spanish and Italian press.

We believe there are common features in the Spanish and Italian press regarding the image of the Catholic Church during the pandemic. In this context, the social system had acquired an important role, so some groups appear as ‘close collaborators of the citizenry’ (Argiñano and Bilbao 2020, 19). Thus, given the social role of the Church, it is probable that its presence in the press during the pandemic was defined by its tasks of spiritual and charitable assistance, and not by its political role in conflict with the authorities, as might have been expected after restrictive measures on the part of the government.

Conflict and deviation-negativity (Van Dijk 1990) are very recurrent news-values in journalistic information (Contreras 2006) and, although we wouldn’t expect it in a tragedy such as the coronavirus pandemic, disappointment with political measures was on the table. In addition, conflict is behind much of religious news because often journalists are more interested in news when it is connected to scandals, conflicts, and negativity (Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020, 4), without forgetting that the pandemic ‘has increased polarization in an already polarized media context’ (Iranzo-Cabrera and López-García 2021, 264).

Often conflict is the key to journalistic interpretation of information about the Church because it is presented as a political entity (Pou-Américo, 2007), however, the same does not happen when the story is about the Church assisting the disadvantaged.

We established various research questions:

- Q1: How many texts about the Catholic Church in the Italian and Spanish press were published in the selected titles during the pandemic?
- Q2: What actions are described in them?
- Q3: In what percentage do actions of a spiritual or assistance nature predominate?
- Q4: In what percentage is the Church a factor of conflict?
- Q5: Are there differences between the Italian and Spanish press?

Thus, hypothesis 1 is regarding the frames of reference through which the role of the Church is interpreted when the story is a global tragedy:

- H1. The Italian and Spanish press gave prevalence to the charitable work of the Catholic Church during the pandemic instead of to the conflict with the political authorities over restrictive measures.

Likewise, the paper seeks to establish the keys to the journalistic construction of the image of the Church in the context of the pandemic:

- Q6. What natural *topoi* are activated in the news about the activity of the Church?
- Q7. What cultural *topoi* are activated in the news about the activity of the Church?
- Q8. Which are positive actions on the part of the Church, according to the press?
- Q9. Which are negative actions on the part of the Church, according to the press?
- Q10. What are the differences between the Italian and Spanish press?

Hypotheses 2 and 3 regard to the evaluation criteria that the media use around the Church:

- H2. The Italian and Spanish press valued the spiritual and welfare work of the Church.
- H3. The Italian and Spanish press criticized the Church's opposition to government measures, reintroducing it as an entity with a political role.

We chose the two most representative newspapers of public opinion in each of the countries, with a significant penetration among the population. In Italy, we chose *Corriere della Sera*, the most read newspaper in 2020 according to the ADS (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa) (Prima online 2020). In Spain, we chose *El País*, the general information newspaper with the greatest circulation (EGM 2020), only surpassed by the sports newspaper *Marca*. Both constitute the quality press (Casasús and Roig 1981, 30) and they have what Imbert and Vidal Beneyto (1986, 26) call the 'performative power' of a newspaper that is a dominant reference, 'power to institutionalize what it says, to give a reality check to everything it publishes and, consequently, to symbolically nullify what it omits'.

The period included in the analysis was four months from the date of the first known case in each country, 30 January 2020, for Italy's *Corriere della Sera* and 31 January 2020, for Spain's *El País*. The purpose was to obtain a wide period that included the main starting moments and first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in both countries. In the research, we chose journalistic stories in which focus was placed on references to the Catholic Church directly linked to the coronavirus, discarding others about the Church, but not connected to the virus, such as the elections in the Spanish Episcopal Conference or the death of Ernesto Cardenal.

Thus, we search terms such as 'catholic', and 'virus', in the virtual archives of each of the newspapers (*El País*, <https://elpais.com/diario/>, *Corriere della Sera*, <http://archivio.corriere.it/Archivio/interface/landing.html>). We didn't include news with circumstantial mentions.

The sample was selected through the virtual newspaper libraries of the newspapers that collect the editions published on paper. It is, therefore, the printed edition that is referenced, although online instruments have been used for its compilation. We consider the printed reference relevant given the peculiarities of production routines in the digital environment, that is, the fact that the implementation of SEO techniques and the constant flow of new information conditions the selection of content. On the other

hand, in the printed edition, the limitation of space and the absence of additional content from the web allow the editorial criteria to be assessed more clearly.

The selection was made based on the presence of the terms ‘catholic’, ‘church’, ‘priest’, ‘bishop’ or ‘pope’, together with ‘covid’, ‘coronavirus’ or ‘virus’. The search focused on the informative and interpretive genres (news, report, interview and chronicle) since in opinion texts the author’s interpretive framework is explicit and is not imposed on the reader, as it is a personal point of view. However, the informative texts are offering an account of verified facts, not a questionable opinion. Thus, the unit of analysis was each unitary informative text.

Three coders – two researchers and a Ph.D. student in Communication – worked on the coding, as well as two researchers from outside the team who acted as external inter-judges to validate the results. The selection of the *topoi* was developed from a random reading of two pieces every week from each paper throughout the period. The process was inductive. Subsequently, the presence of the *topoi* was verified in the entire sample, so that each coder analyzed two thirds of the total sample to ensure that each third was analyzed by two different coders.

Two types of data were obtained from the units of analysis: identifying data and analytical data. The identification data is necessary to identify each piece; they are date, headline and page or URL. The analysis data refers to the content and narrative options of the author. They are, therefore, the frame: the kind of collaboration with the authorities; the type of activity and the common places or natural and cultural ‘*topoi*’.

The ‘news frames’ are part of the journalistic story because they serve as a conceptual framework (Sádaba and Virgili 2007, 210) from which the journalist analyzes, gives meaning and, finally, narrates what happened. It is the place, therefore, where the journalist’s interpretation and the ‘framing strategy’ of the media are found (López-Rabadán 2010). It is a way of approaching the mediation process through the journalistic story, with which the media becomes an ‘essential actor in the process of production and construction of public discourse, but far from the only one’ (Valera Ordaz 2016, 15).

That work involves a selection process, which means accepting and rejecting. As Entman (1993, 54) says, ‘most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience’. The first step in analyzing the building of the image of the Church during the pandemic is to draw a map with what they include as preferred issue and what they put in the background.

In this work we connect the deductive process (Ardèvol-Abreu 2015; Ballesteros Herencia 2015, 52) from the five news frames established by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) as generic frames (conflict, attribution of responsibility, human interest, economic consequences, and morality), with the inductive process, to discover the common places or *topoi* present in the analyzed news. They will be our specific frames.

So, we can organize into categories the events narrated by the media, according to the focus of the journalists. The objective is to be able to quantify the presence of generic frames about the Church in the pandemic: conflict (due to opposition to restrictions), human interest (due to assistance activity), attribution of responsibility (due to the implementation of prevention measures), morality (due to the judgment of the

actions) and the economic consequences (due to the impact of the pandemic on the finances of the Church).

- We will refer to conflict whenever there is a confrontation or disagreement (physical, verbal or ideological) between the authorities (including the police) and the members of the Church.
- We will talk about attribution of responsibility, when the Church is pointed out as being responsible for the development of the pandemic or the possible contagion due to its action or omission, as well as when it is related to possible solutions.
- We will refer to the human interest when the text reflects the suffering of people, members of the Church or not, who need comfort or assistance from the Church, as well as when the texts provoke emotions: anger, tenderness, sadness.
- The economic consequences are present due the effect of the pandemic on the economic situation of the Church.
- Finally, we will consider the moral approach when judging behavior.

Conflict about the Church often arises linked to civil authorities and political leaders. In this case, the imposition of restrictive measures with a direct impact on Catholic communities was fertile ground for controversy. Failure to comply with the norm, the intervention of the police in churches or religious ceremonies, fines to some clerics or Catholic people for breaking lockdown, the internal division between different bishops or Catholic groups about the rules of the Episcopal Conference or the requirement of stopping the bans on celebrations were cause for confrontation, controversy or disagreement.

However, next to this negativity, the opposite behavior was the framework of responsibility. We found this framework in the news that showed the Church complying with health regulations to avoid contagion, even going beyond those established by the authorities; the network of coordination in parishes and dioceses to do prevention pedagogy; the alteration of the liturgical calendar and the proposal of alternative dates for the main festivities such as Easter; and prayers, blessings and liturgies without people being present – an exceptionally unusual circumstance.

The third frame is that of human interest. It includes the charitable behaviors of priests or religious people: food distribution, help over the telephone; the presence and prayer of priests in cemeteries. It also includes giving words of encouragement, teaching and testimony urging people to accept the lockdown situation and to prepare for the return of normality with greater sensitivity towards people who suffer; concern for those who are alone or suffering, for those hospitalized and for the families of those who die and cannot accompany them; tributes to health personnel; prayer to ask for the end of the pandemic; dispensation from Lenten abstinence, and understanding for those who have difficulties or fear after lockdown in fulfilling their religious obligations; missionary activity in a pandemic situation; care even for unbelievers in need of comfort.

The fourth frame is the economic consequences, very common in the information on the pandemic. It is difficult to link this one to the Church except regarding finances or the economic impact of the suppression of some religious celebrations such as Holy Week in emblematic places such as Seville or Rome.

The last frame is linked to morality and therefore to the moral assessment of behaviors both by the media and by selected sources. The media are often critical of the people in question, especially of some bishops with very personal positions on the complicated issues.

We have searched in the units of analysis for the media keys to present each event. Because of this, we have focused on the main elements in the news: headlines, summaries and highlights. We have applied the content analysis (Krippendorff 2012) because it helps us to show the hidden words behind the obvious, in other words the subliminal content. This is the way of trying to get an idea of the journalists' point of view (Piñuel 2002).

This is the connection between saying and thinking, the link between expression and understanding as Van Dijk (1993, 147) explains: 'the structures and meanings [...] reflect the structures and contents of the specific mental model of that individual reporter about [a] specific event'. In any case, whether the decision is conscious or involuntary, the result is part of the message that the reader receives. This is our objective. We do not seek to inquire about the motivations of the media but to show the constructed image to the reader.

In the analyzed texts, the events narrated explain the contribution of the Church during the pandemic, both in a positive and negative sense. The list of positive behaviors is made up of the following:

- compliance with sanitary regulations
- establishment of guidelines to avoid contagion
- making available different ways of following the liturgy
- charitable activities
- spiritual or emotional accompaniment
- to stay when others do not, such as at funerals
- recommendations and testimonies for living during the lockdown

There are also negative behaviors and some can even be ambiguous. Among the negatives:

- non-compliance with the rules
- opposition to the rules of the government or recommendations of the Vatican or the Episcopal Conference
- to deny the virus
- peculiar and extravagant behavior, according to the media

We have considered a behavior ambiguous when, depending to the observer, it can be described as positive or negative. For example, the claim of religious freedom because of the intervention of the police in a legal mass, according to the rules. For people who accept the rule, it is legitimate; for people who consider any assembly dangerous, even if it is legal, it will be interpreted as an unnecessary provocation. In any case, the doubt disappears when we read how the media has presented the fact. Therefore, is important to focus on headlines and prominent elements of the way the information is presented.

We have analyzed two kinds of issues: the relationship between the Church and the government, on the one hand, and the Church's activity during the pandemic, on the other. The relationship with the authorities is one of the most relevant elements because the restrictive measures implied, *de facto*, an intervention in the life of the Church. Truly, the context imposed restrictions in all social fields and this is why it was interesting to know the attitude of 'collaboration', 'non-collaboration', or 'other' (cases non explicit in the text) on the part of the Church. We have differentiated the activity of the Church during the first months of the pandemic into: 'volunteer and social assistance tasks'; 'Liturgy and sacraments'; 'concern for herself' and 'others', when not specified.

To differentiate a positive or negative action, we have analyzed the *topoi*. The *topoi* or common places are ideas shared by the community, naturally or acquired, that 'allow to establish values and hierarchies', according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1994, 146).

Their analysis has been developed by the research group 'Family and Media' (González Gaitano 2015) and addresses the presence of common places related to social virtues (Pérez Martínez 2016). Some works about it are published by Norberto González Gaitano (2015), Giovanni Tridente (2009) or Piotr Studnicki (2016).

Their presence in the news is essential (González Gaitano 2010, 76) and contributes to developing the frames with a constellation of issues based on the different events and the way of interpreting them. Barthes (2009, 237) called them the 'reserve of themes', that are not questioned because of their extension and assumption by the community. That is why they are effective.

We can find two kind of *topoi*, natural and cultural (González Gaitano 2015). The *topoi* of the first group are natural to the human being, they are anthropological; the *topoi* of the second group are cultural products, the result of ideologies. Since the *topoi* are presuppositions for the journalist's narration, and that they share with the reader to the point of 'guiding the judgment' (Studnicki 2016), it is possible to find more than one *topos* in the same text. The *topoi* are related to frames and indicate the predominant frame.

In relation to the action of the Church during the pandemic, we find the following common places. We have formulated them as statements of latent content in the news. The natural *topoi* are:

- suffering and vulnerable people are the priority
- priests know how to accept death and spiritual pain
- the Church consoles and accompanies in the tragedy
- the pandemic is an occasion for improving our spirituality
- the Church complies with prevention rules

And the cultural *topoi*:

- religion is tradition
- religion is fanaticism
- religion has an immutable ancestral liturgy; our astonishment at the mediatization of religious rites is natural

- religious stubbornness leads to violation of law and conflict
- there are two kinds of clergy: the collaborator and the intolerant
- the Church is only concerned with its finances
- the Church considers the pandemic a divine punishment
- religion leads to peculiar attitudes

4. Results

4.1. Generic frames

The sample is made up a total of 62 pieces in *El País* and 73 in *Corriere della Sera* (see Table 1). The two most relevant frames in the information published on the actions of the Church during the first wave of covid-19 are the ‘attribution of responsibilities’ and ‘human interest’. In *El País* the ‘attribution of responsibilities’ predominates (33.8%) over ‘human interest’ (30.6%) while in *Corriere della Sera* it is the opposite, ‘human interest’ predominates notably (61.6%) over ‘attribution of responsibilities’ (26%).

‘Conflict’ is the third frame, with a much lower percentage, in both newspapers (19.3%, *El País*, and 9.5%, *Corriere della Sera*) and it is the same with morality. The ‘economic consequences’ are only relevant in *El País* (4.8%).

About the attitude of the Church to the authorities, the highest percentage is for the field ‘others’ that do not specify the degree of collaboration (see Table 2). This indicates that it is not the priority for the media. In addition, both in *El País* (30.6%) and in *Corriere della Sera* (17.8%), the number of texts that show the willingness of the Church to collaborate is higher, almost double, compared to those which do not (17, 7% and 8.2, respectively).

Regarding the actions of the Church, the difference between *El País* and *Corriere della Sera* is striking. Thus, for *El País*, the main activities of the Church are the liturgy, especially the Eucharist – sometimes ‘clandestine’, or funerals (22.5%). In contrast, assistance to the underprivileged and spiritual care remain in the background (4.8%). *Corriere della Sera* is very interested in publishing news about initiatives other than the Mass, such as blessings in cemeteries, showing relics or sick calls. It has a greater number of pieces on liturgy than *El País* (26%), however, the number of pieces about

Table 1. News frames of the Church by newspapers.

Frames/Newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>
Attribution of responsibility	33.8% (21)	26% (19)
Human interest	30.6% (19)	61.6% (45)
Conflict	19.3% (12)	9.5% (7)
Morality	11.2% (7)	2.7% (2)
Economic consequences	4.8% (3)	0
Total	62	73

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 2. Attitude of the Church to the authorities.

Newspapers/Attitudes	Collaboration	No collaboration	Other
<i>El País</i>	30.6% (19)	17.7% (11)	51.6% (32)
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	17.8% (13)	8.2% (6)	73.9% (54)

Source: Author's compilation.

charitable assistance is also higher (10.9%). The only higher percentage in *El País* is about the lack of activity (14.5%). It is possibly one of the biggest differences between the two newspapers. *Corriere della Sera* focuses on the hard work of priests and their sacrifice in caring for the patients and families. The evidence is that *Corriere della Sera* includes a lot of news about sick bishops, priests and nuns, if they are victims of Covid-19, but *El País* does not. Furthermore, *Corriere della Sera* uses the interview genre to give religious people a voice, an initiative that is lacking in *El País* (see Table 3).

About the frame ‘attribution of responsibility’, both newspapers show how the Church has implemented measures to prevent contagion and, in fewer cases, point out when it has not been done (see Table 4). Half of the pieces refer to how the Church has taken care of prevention, hygienic measures and compliance with Health regulations. In *El País*, 42.8% do so, compared to 9.5% that address the opposite issue. In *Corriere della Sera*, 58.8% have to do with following regulations, and there is no piece that reports on the opposite phenomenon.

Both newspapers emphasize the celebration of rites in solitude or the closing of iconic churches, such as the Duomo of Milan, which offers an image of exceptionality. This percentage corresponds to the focus on liturgical actions by *El País* compared to the focus on assistance by *Corriere della Sera*. Thus, in *El País*, 23.8% of pieces show surprise about rites never having been celebrated in such a way before (alone or without the sign of peace). *Corriere della Sera* also echoes this but with a lesser percentage (11.7%). *El País*, for example, jokes about the disappointment of the parishioners who in 2020 were not allowed to kiss the Christ of Medinaceli on Good Friday according to custom. The newspaper said: ‘It is not clear if the spell loses strength when the kiss is lacking’ (Quesada 2020). Most of the cases are from Holy Week celebrations, especially in the Vatican, with the image of the Pope in a completely empty St. Peter’s Square. Both newspapers include anecdotal news; *El País* writes about a Detroit priest who sprinkles holy water for blessings with a toy water pistol to keep his distance, and in *Corriere della Sera*, about another American priest who celebrates mass while the parishioners remain in the car and called it a ‘drive-in mass’ (Maniaci 2020).

Table 3. Main activities of the Church.

Newspapers/Activities	Assistance	Liturgy	Not activity	Other
<i>El País</i>	4.8% (3)	22.5% (14)	14.5% (9)	58% (36)
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	10.9% (8)	26% (19)	4.1% (3)	58.9% (43)

Source: Author’s compilation

Table 4. Frame ‘attribution of responsibility’.

Frame/Newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>
The Church implements measures to prevent contagion	42.8% (9)	58.8% (10)
No preventive measures are taken	9.5% (2)	0
Celebrations behind closed doors an unusual image of the Church	23.8% (5)	11.7% (2)
Pedagogy of prevention in parishes and dioceses	9.5% (2)	0
Later celebration of Easter	4.7% (1)	0
Alternatives to liturgical activity via electronic means	4.7% (1)	23.5% (4)
Peculiar and extravagant behaviors. in the opinion of the media	4.7% (1)	5.8% (1)

Source: Author’s compilation

In addition, both newspapers talk about sharing the celebration of the liturgy through electronic media, television, and the Internet. *Corriere della Sera* devotes more attention to it (23.5% compared to 4.7% in *El País*) not only because of the novelty but especially because of *Corriere della Sera*'s interest in priests. The Italian paper dedicated more pieces to the tasks of priests and among them the necessary adaptation of liturgical activity through new media. Regarding celebrating Easter later, the impact was particularly noted in Seville, where there are the confraternities, groups of people devoted to the image of Christ or the Virgin. These became the protagonists of the news (*El País* 4.7%). In fact, one of the colorful bits of news collected is about the sale of a hand sanitizer with a 'brother's scent'. Finally, we have included news about the task of spreading the message about prevention of contagion among the parishioners only in *El País* (9.5%). Furthermore, as has been said, peculiar behaviors are mentioned but they are not very significant (4.7% in *El País* and 5.8% in *Corriere della Sera*). In other texts we can find these keys but not predominantly, so they are not included as prevalent frames in the quantification.

The frame 'conflict' includes resistance to the measures implemented by governments or ecclesiastical authorities and their consequences as fines or sanctions. There are incidents of police intervention and, sometimes, the journalist is at the scene and evaluates the 'illegal' situation. It's funny but there is an article in which a journalist describes an 'illegal' Mass and explains the rules – and the conclusion is that the rules are not being violated, according to his own story. When we say 'sanctions', we refer to fines or something like this, because, if the police had to intervene, the behavior probably will be punished.

In *El País*, non-compliance and sanctions are more frequent (50%) than in *Corriere della Sera* (42%), although it differentiates as to whether there was only a complaint or also a fine. In *Corriere della Sera*, on the other hand, more emphasis is placed on the different positions taken up regarding the norms imposed by the civil authorities, or the different sensitivities in relation to the freedom of the Church to self-regulate its activity (57.1%). *Corriere della Sera* interviews bishops reluctant to avoid the celebration of the Eucharist; something that, however, we do not find in *El País* (16.6%). In the latter, on the other hand, one finds more importance given to the political use of the argument of religious freedom by some groups or parties (25%) (see Table 5).

This difference in the main conflict between the Church and the respective governments must be sought on the one hand, in the interest of the media, but also in the reality of the country itself. In fact, *El País* emphasizes the criticism of some Spanish bishops for the recommendations of the Episcopal Conference but includes a description of the Italian situation and the role of the Pope in the relationship between the Church and government. *El País*, in addition, insists on presenting an image of the Church as divided. It presents the bishop of Alcalá, Mons. Reig, as a counterpoint to the president of the council of bishops, Cardinal Omella. We can see the same in *Corriere della Sera* in a piece that recounts the ins and outs of the tensions between the Church and the Government: 'A telephone call to Casa Santa Marta. Thus the premier has disarmed the CEI [Italian Bishops' Conference]' (Franco 2020). Finally, conspiracy theories and denialism are not present in the *Corriere della Sera*. They are in *El País*

Table 5. Frame 'conflict'.

Frame/Newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>
non-compliance with the rules without sanction	25% (3)	0
Sanctions	25% (3)	42.8% (3)
opposition to guidelines from both the government and the Vatican or the Episcopal Conference	16.6% (2)	57.1% (4)
Denialism	0	0
conspiracy theories appealing to the religious factor	8.3% (1)	0
Political use of religious freedom	25% (3)	0

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 6. Frame 'human interest'.

Frame/Newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>
assistance activities	26.3% (5)	17.7% (8)
spiritual or emotional accompaniment	10.5% (2)	31.1% (14)
Being present when others cannot be (funerals)	15.7% (3)	28.8% (13)
Alerts, recommendations and testimonials to help people withstand lockdown	36.8% (7)	2.2% (1)
Family or social traditions	10.5% (2)	0
Victims (bishops, priests and religious)	0	20% (9)

Source: Author's compilation.

but only as a prejudice (8.3%), that is, attributing to the Church the explanation of the pandemic as a 'divine punishment' when it is not true.

The frame of 'human interest' focuses on the activity of the Church in assisting the underprivileged with the distribution of food or direct aid; soup kitchens or the work of Caritas, but also includes the spiritual comfort of patients or their families as well as emotional comfort for any person addressing the Church. *El País* devotes more attention to assistance to vulnerable, 26%, compared to 17.7% in *Corriere della Sera*, but the latter focuses much more (31.1%) on the issue of spiritual and emotional accompaniment, especially on the part of parish priests and bishops, whereas in *El País* this is present in a tiny minority of pieces (10.5%) (see Table 6).

In the same way, *Corriere della Sera*, as has been said, dedicates a lot of space to showing the work of priests and bishops who feel close to their community, especially when it comes to funerals or blessings in the cemetery in the absence of loved ones (28.8% in *Corriere della Sera*, compared to 15.7% in *El País*).

In this field, references to death and the disposition of coffins in cemetery chapels or in Churches until they can be buried have been included. This testimony also joins that of bishops, missionaries, volunteers, Catholic people and even some patients who have found their faith strengthened after their hard experience. *El País* has incorporated it with more dedication (36.8%) but the figure in *Corriere della Sera* (2.2%) can be misleading. The reason is that this figure is separated from the one that corresponds to the labors of priests. In that sense, it is striking that only *Corriere della Sera* documented the victims of the virus among bishops, priests and religious. For *Corriere della Sera*, including them as protagonists, sources or voices of social relevance seems more natural than for the Spanish newspaper.

Finally, a reference to traditions in *El País* (10.5%) has been included, because some people spoke of consoling religious rites as part of a family tradition that is no longer used, but that is missed. *Corriere della Sera* doesn't mention it.

Regarding the frame 'Economic consequences' in *El País* there are only three pieces that refer to the economic impact of the suppression of Holy Week, to the marketing of a hand sanitizer with the smell of incense (in both cases it is not an activity of the Church itself, but of some Catholic people) and another on the impact of the coronavirus on the finances of the Church and its repercussion on the economy of the parishes. In *Corriere della Sera* there are no uses of this frame.

Finally, the frame 'morality' is present mainly in opinion texts where moral evaluations of behaviors can be made. In *El País* it appears in a veiled way in a couple of informative pieces that focused on a hidden breach of the norm (the headline of one of them is 'Attending mass through the back door'), however, they show in the text that no norm prohibits what is being described:

The priest, Miguel Ángel Nieto, explains in a statement published on social networks that the agents invited them to leave the Church or, otherwise, they would be sanctioned. "We were only five parishioners and the priest, so the safety distances were more than assured," he says. The state of alarm, which establishes that you can only leave home for essential activities such as going to work or shopping, does not prohibit the liturgy of the Eucharist, but conditions its celebration to "avoid crowds" since it is possible to "guarantee a minimum distance of one meter" between assistant and assistant." (Carranco 2020)

Only two pieces appear in *Corriere della Sera*, one about the preconceived idea that the pandemic is divine punishment and another that criticizes a priest for imposing preventive measures. The text criticizes an 'excessive zeal'.

In summary, in *El País*, the frame 'attribution of responsibility' predominates above all. The focus is on the acceptance by the Church of sanitary rules, and its collaboration in the prevention of contagion. The second frame is related to the Church's activity in caring for the vulnerable and providing spiritual assistance, and the presence of priests at funerals. The conflict frame is related to the division of opinions regarding the governmental measures and the resistance to the restrictions of some voices within the Church, even outside the Church, but using the argument of religious freedom to demand a change in the measures. Morality is present, in the appeals to *topoi* that associate religion with superstition, charlatanism, denialism or conflict. Finally, the news does not delve into the economic consequences except linked to the suppression of Holy Week liturgies, the closing of the churches or the absence of pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago.

In *Corriere della Sera* the most relevant frame is that of 'human interest' because it gives more prominence to the interview genre, and thus gives information about specific people, previously unknown, who are interviewed either because of their experience or because of their involvement in the support and care of the community. In this sense, it is common to find the voice of bishops or priests concerned about the faithful of their diocese or parish; engaged in assistance tasks or promoting charity, mutual aid and greater sensitivity with others in difficult times. In *El País*, these words come more frequently from the important messages of the Pope, and connect with the frame of 'conflict' and the division between different sectors of the Church, which is much more prevalent in *El País* than in *Corriere della Sera*. Finally, it is striking that the *Corriere della Sera* offers more variety of Catholic voices but also fewer moral judgments about the Church even when some bishops or the CEI

demand a more careful treatment by the authorities regarding the religious life of the community.

4.2. *Topoi* or common places

The frames are complemented with the analysis of *topoi* or common places that delve into the latent content of the information. Thus, for example, the attribution of responsibility, with the *topoi*, has a different dimension. It is not a question of responsibility as an attribution of cause-effect, but in a deeper sense, of assumption of basic principles concerning human nature and interaction with others in society. In fact, among the *topoi* present in the news, we have found ‘the Church complies with prevention measures’ or ‘the Church consoles and accompanies in the tragedy’ as an example of ‘attribution of responsibility’ and at the same time of ‘human interest’. With this other important frame present in this paper, something similar happens: ‘human interest’ finds its roots in those common places: ‘the suffering and vulnerable are the priority’. ‘Morality’ also connects with the judgment which is the basis of admiration and gratitude towards priests, ‘the priest knows how to remain close in the death’, or the conviction that this time will generate a spiritual renewal, ‘the pandemic is an occasion of greater spirituality’.

On the other hand, the ‘ideological’ or cultural *topoi* include prejudices or the point of view from which the Church is judged, which emanates from dominant thoughts such as: ‘the Church is tradition’, ‘the Church is fanaticism’, ‘religion has unchanging traditional rites, so it is natural to be surprised by changes such as going online’, ‘the Church considers the pandemic a divine punishment’ or ‘religion fosters peculiar and strange attitudes’.

In this field appear the *topoi* linked to economic consequences such as ‘the Church is concerned about its finances’; or conflict, such as ‘stubbornness leads to violation of law and conflict’ or ‘there are two types of clerics: collaborators and rebels’.

The natural *topoi* at the basis of judgments on religious activity are shown in Table 7.

The cultural *topoi* at the basis of judgments on religious activity are shown in Table 8.

In some cases, the *topoi* can be paired as opposites, thus, in contrast with compliance (‘the Church complies with prevention’), non-compliance appears (‘stubbornness leads to violation of law and conflict’); in contrast to the frame of the sacrificial and self-surrendering priest (‘the priest knows how to accompany people who are dying’), there is the frame that the clergy is divided by different opinions about the measures against Covid (‘there are two types of clergy: collaborators and rebels’) or in contrast to

Table 7. *Topoi* or common places: natural *topoi*.

Natural <i>topoi</i> /newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere</i>
suffering and vulnerable people are the priority	9.6% (6)	19% (14)
the priest knows how to accompany people who are dying	6.4% (4)	21.9% (16)
the Church consoles and accompanies in the midst of tragedy	3.2% (2)	13.6% (10)
the pandemic is an occasion for greater spirituality	8% (5)	8.2% (6)
the Church complies with prevention	12.9% (8)	5.4% (4)

Source: Author’s compilation.

Table 8. *Topoi* or common places: cultural *topoi*.

Cultural <i>topoi</i> /Newspapers	<i>El País</i>	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>
Religion is tradition	4.8% (3)	0
Religion is fanaticism	11.2% (7)	0
Religion has unchanging traditional rites, so it is natural to be surprised by changes such as going online	14.5% (9)	19% (14)
Stubbornness brings about violation of rules and conflict	4.8% (3)	4% (3)
There are two types of clerics: collaborative and rebellious	16.1% (10)	6.8% (5)
The Church is concerned about its finances	1.6% (1)	0
The Church considers the pandemic a divine punishment	1.6% (1)	1.3% (1)
Religion fosters peculiar and strange attitudes	4.8% (3)	0

Source: Author's compilation.

the Church being concerned about itself ('the Church is concerned about its finances'), we find that the Church is focused on those who suffer ('the suffering and vulnerable are the priority 'and' the Church consoles and accompanies in the midst of tragedy'). In this sense, the results are always favorable to the Church: the references to compliance with prevention are more numerous than references to violations (12.9% compared to 4.8%, in *El País* and 5.4% compared to 4%, in *Corriere della Sera*). In the same way, the Church is seen as more focused on others, especially the suffering and vulnerable, than on itself (9.6% compared to 1.6% in *El País*; 19% compared to 0 in *Corriere della Sera*).

The more unusual *topoi* in both newspapers are those linked to a negative view of the Church and the role of religion in society. In *El País* there predominates a Manichean view of Catholics, especially the clergy (16.1%, compared to 6.8% in *Corriere della Sera*) and a constant conviction about religious fanaticism (11.2% compared to 0 in the Italian newspaper). In *Corriere della Sera*, in contrast, the work of priests and bishops stands out; they are seen as dedicated to the needy, rather than engaged in litigation.

Finally, both newspapers share a somewhat stagnant vision of the Church; that's why technological developments are repeated as surprising news (14.5% in *El País* and 19% in *Corriere della Sera*). The interest of the press in this is logical but focus on the novelty and not so much on the adaptability of the Church itself is striking.

5. Conclusions

The Catholic Church was subject of news interest during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic with a similar volume of information in Spain and Italy. However, *Corriere della Sera* gave voice to Catholic protagonists more frequently than *El País*, above all, to bishops, priests and volunteers. In this sense, it showed the hard and necessary work of priests, especially at death-beds and at lonely funerals, as well as through the proximity of bishops and parish priests to their parishioners.

Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed, regarding the frames of reference through which the role of the Church is interpreted when the story is a global tragedy: The quality press in Italy and Spain gave precedence to the charitable work of the Catholic Church during the pandemic, as opposed to the conflict with the political authorities over restrictive measures. Moreover, when it comes to the relationship with civil institutions, a positive image of the Church is offered, ready to collaborate and

apply the preventive measures recommended by the health authorities. Discrepancies regarding the application of the norms on liturgical activity appear as a factor of internal division, especially in *El País*, but conflict is not the predominant framework.

El País insists on showing the Church's disappointment with the measures, while *Corriere della Sera* shows the imaginative effort to implement novel ways to broadcast the celebrations of the liturgy through the Internet. In both cases, the surprise at this ability to adapt to the online context is constant. In the same way, the idea of exceptionality accompanies the account of ceremonies and rites in the absence of the community.

The *topoi* or common places present in the information are, on the one hand, of a natural or anthropological nature: 'suffering and vulnerable people are the priority', 'the priest knows how to accompany people who are dying', 'the Church consoles and accompanies in the midst of tragedy', 'the pandemic is an occasion for greater spirituality', 'the Church complies with prevention measures'; and on the other hand, cultural or ideological: 'religion is tradition', 'religion is fanaticism', 'religion has unchanging traditional rites, so it is natural to be surprised by changes such as going online', 'stubbornness leads to violation of law and conflict', 'there are two types of clergy: collaborative and rebellious', 'the Church is concerned about its finances', 'the Church considers the pandemic a divine punishment', 'religion fosters peculiar and strange attitudes'.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are confirmed, since in the media analyzed both in Italy and in Spain, the spiritual and welfare work of the Church is valued (H2) and its opposition to government measures is criticized (H3). However, the two are not comparable since the positive assessment predominates in the story when there are dualities in the *topoi* found in the interpretation of the facts. Thus, the Church appears more concerned about others ('the suffering and vulnerable are the priority' and 'the Church consoles and accompanies in the midst of tragedy') than for itself ('the Church is concerned about its finances'). Likewise, it makes more effort in prevention, caring for people and the common good ('the Church complies with prevention') than in confrontation and controversy ('stubbornness leads to violation of law and conflict').

The negative view of the Church and the role of religion in society can also be paired with opposite frames: in contrast to the frame of self-sacrificial priests ('the priest knows how to accompany people who are dying'), we read that the clergy is divided by the prevention measures ('there are two types of clergy: collaborative and rebellious'). We see this duality in both newspapers. In *El País* Manichean prejudice prevails over Catholic sense, especially with regard to the clergy. In *Corriere della Sera*, on the other hand, the work of priests and bishops stands out: they are seen as dedicated to the needy, rather than engaged in litigation.

We can therefore appreciate that the construction of the image of the Church in the media largely depends on the weight of prejudices or socially accepted *topoi* on the situation that the media is willing to accept. As seen in the global crisis of Covid-19, the media that give voice to the protagonists enrich the story with points of view that could not have been foreseen. However, those that ignore the news that does not correspond with the pre-established patterns obscure an important part of reality.

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